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ABSTRACT

The Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) strives to eliminate the perceived abuses of intercollegiate debate: machine gun delivery, the overemphasis of evidence cards, and the use of "squirrel cases" (cases so narrow that they ignore most of the resolution or are actually off the topic). CEDA philosophically and, at least to some extent, practically supports the concept of the intent--or spirit--of the resolution. Three ideas from general semantics are particularly suited to thinking about this problem: non-identity, non-allness, and self-reflexiveness. Claiming that there is a true meaning of the topic violates the concept of non-identity. Non-allness means that a word does not represent all that it is supposed to represent, while self-reflexiveness implies that a final conclusion can never be reached about anything. In short, teaching debaters that resolutions have a certain intent is tantamount to saying to them that there is a predetermined, all-encompassing, objective truth, beyond which there is an intellectual void. There is nothing worse for an activity that stresses critical thinking. (Sixty-one references are attached.) (RS)

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General Semantics and the "Spirit" of the Resolution

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Intercollegiate debating is a co-curricular activity that affords its participants the opportunity to enhance their critical thinking, communication, and research skills. However, it is a unique activity, and, as such, is often criticized for providing an unrealistic argumentation setting. A review of several Forensics and communication journals[1] reveals a plethora of criticisms directed at intercollegiate debate (Bennett, 1972; Benson, 1979; Boaz & Ziegelmueller, 1964; Brockriede, 1970; Cathcart, 1956; Christophersen, 1960; Decker, 1974; DeMougeot, 1972; Ehrlich, 1972; Eman & Lukehart, 1976; Friedman, 1962; Gow, 1967; Haiman, 1964; Harris, 1973; Haywood & Priestly, 1973; Howe, 1979, 1981; Hynes, 1979; James, 1979; Kovalcheck, 1979; Kruger, 1973a; Kruger, 1973b; Lynch, 1979; McGuckin, 1972; Morello, 1979; Murrish, 1964; Nebergall, 1976; Olson, 1971; Padrow, 1956; Pfau, 1979; Ritter, 1974; Ritter, 1977; Rowland & Deatherage, 1988; Shiffrin, 1972; Shoen & Matlon, 1974; Swinney, 1968; Thomas, 1974; Tomlinson, 1981, 1985; Towne, 1974; Vasilius & DeStephen, 1979; Wenzel, 1971; Windes, 1960). For example, the speed of delivery is so rapid that someone who is untrained in the specialized terminology or who is unfamiliar with "verbal signposting" (referring to specific arguments by a number or letter, as in an outline) may not understand much of the substance of the controversy. Indeed, abuse of jargon and verbal shorthand is so prevalent that the participants themselves

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may not understand some of the issues that are discussed. The problem is compounded by an overemphasis on evidence cards. Some debaters may feel that the number of quotes read for a particular point is more important than their ability to reason. Another focus of criticism is the "squirrel" case. Tomlinson (1983) explains:

> During the late 1960's . . . affirmative teams began to more [sic] narrowly interpret the resolution . . . . We might define a "squirrel" case as one which is so narrow that it ignores most of the resolution, or is actually off the topic and yet the affirmative tries to make it appear that the case is topical (p. 1).

These abuses created such a strong negative reaction that several coaches formed a separate forensic organization. Established in 1971, what we now know as the Cross Examination Debate Association strives to eliminate the perceived abuses of intercollegiate debate: machine gun delivery, the overemphasis of evidence cards, and the use of squirrel cases (Bartanen & Frank, 1991). This essay is concerned with CEDA's philosophical position regarding squirrel cases. I am concerned that, in an attempt to discourage squirrel cases, some CEDA coach-critics may over-emphasize the intent--or "spirit"--of the resolution. By spirit of the resolution, I mean, as Patterson and Zarefsky (1983) imply, those cases "lying in the center of the topic"

(p. 160). That CEDA supports the concept of resolutional intent is clear. Tomlinson (1983) notes: "Another hallmark of CEDA has been to ask debaters to remember the intent of the resolution. . . . To ignore . . . [this] is to reject the basic philosophy of the organization." Tomlinson (1981) also claims that "In CEDA the 'spirit' of the resolution has survived but is under assault" (p. 5). Philosophically, at least, CEDA endorses the notion of resolutional intent.

In practice, though, I am not sure of the longevity of the "spirit." Most of us, as coach-critics, have probably voted for a position that was marginally topical according to the "spirit" of the resolution. Of course, I have heard more than one conversation and read more than one ballot indicating that the affirmative team lost because the coach-critic thought the case was not topical (rather than the negative team arguing and winning that the case was not topical). Those instances, no matter how few and far between, concern me. Thus, I contend that the outright rejection of "squirrel" cases because they are not "spiritual" enough is wrong. First, I will elaborate on the concept of the spirit of the resolution. Second, I will discuss three concepts from General Semantics that should serve as a framework for analyzing resolutional intent. Third, I will discuss some of the implications of propositional intent in light of General Semantics.

The spirit of the resolution

The meaning of resolutional intent is not as obvious as one might think. I see at least two potential ways to define the concept. The first explanation of propositional intent begins with the question "why are we debating _____ now?" Capp and Capp (1965) explain: "The reasons for debating any proposition arise from the circumstances that gave it current interest." According to Howe (1985), debaters should view the resolution in a historical perspective, trace its evolution to a contemporary social concern, and answer "why is this important to us now?" Truely topical cases will then manifest themselves above the rest. Then, and only then, will debaters know exactly what the framers intended them to research and discuss. While this process is certainly an excellent exercise for teaching research skills, it is not likely to produce a "true" intent. It seems likely that the more thorough a debater researches a topic, the more possible case areas he or she would recognize. I doubt that reading everything written on a given topic would reveal the meaning(s). Indeed, any given field or discipline will have experts who disagree on fundamental issues. But again, at least in my forensic experience, some participants talk and act as though some true intent exists.

The second explanation--what did the writers of the resolution intend to be topical?--seems simple. However, as

a debater, I never knew who the framers were, and even if I had, I doubt that they would have been able (or willing) to provide the definitive list of topical case areas. Indeed, the trend seems to be away from such an elusive "list." NDT topic framers used to include parameters with each resolution to clarify its meaning. To my knowledge, there was never a consensus that those parameters were binding, and they do not even exist anymore (Ulrich, 1990). Although the writers of the resolution may have a specific intent for the resolution that debaters should strive to discover, it is unlikely that debaters could find out from the framers what that intent is.

In retrospect, there seem to be at least two ways to get at the intent of the resolution: tracing the historical development and importance of the subject, and relying on the framers. In any case, I consider the general concept of intent to be potentially counter productive for our debaters. In the next section, I hope to draw some concepts from General Semantics to support this supposition.

A framework from General Semantics

I have identified three ideas from General Semantics that seem particularly suited to my thinking: non-identity, non-allness, and self-reflexiveness.

According to Johnson (1946) the simplest way of looking at non-identity is to say "A is not A." That is, the

word--the symbol with which we designate a thing--is not that actual thing. Johnson exemplifies this notion by discussing a pail of water. To an eskimo, a "room temperature" bucket of water might feel warm. To a desert dweller, it would probably feel cool. "Warm" and "cool," then, are merely labels that we attach to "things out there," like pails of water, based on our individual perceptions of reality. Arguing that there is a single, objective measure to determine the water's temperature, for example, is to say that we need not be capable of feeling-perceiving for our selves. Thus, the concept of non-identity emphasizes an individual's perception of reality.

Non-allness is a General Semantics concept that is related to non-identity. By saying "A is not all A" we mean that a word does not represent all that it is supposed to represent. Each time we make a statement about a particular experience, we are abstracting that experience. We pull out some of the details of the experience, but we leave others. Johnson illustrates this point by discussing gossip:

> People evaluate second-, or fifth-, or tenth-hand statements (abstracts) as if they were sufficient and conclusive. They form judgments of the individuals concerned, and even take action . . . on the basis of such high-order abstracts. . . . Unconcscious of abstracting, unaware of the differences and relations among levels of

> abstraction, they mistake high-order inferences for first-order descriptions, and descriptions for facts, and "facts" (as personally abstracted) for realities (p. 180).

Even those who are aware of the dangers of treating abstractions as fact sometimes do it anyway. When this happens, we forget that statements do not include all of the experience; that each level of inference includes less of the experience than the previous level; that each level is further removed from the factual experience. When we assume that an abstraction is fact, we undergo a signal reaction. That is, we respond to the "fact" automatically--without reflection or thought. "Under such conditions," Johnson warns, "when symbols become symbols, it is fatefully true, as Korzybski has stressed, that 'those who rule the symbols rule you.'" Conversely, if we are aware of how we interpret statements, we can better "regulate" our reactions and behaviors.

The third concept I wish to include is self-reflexiveness. Johnson explains:

> We use language for talking about language, we make maps of maps, statements about statements, evaluations of evaluations; we make abstracts of abstracts indefinitely. . . . abstracting is self-reflexive (p. 184).

When we interpret--or abstract--an experience, that

interpretation is affected by our humanness. This process is a "natural bodily function" like digestion, for example. When we realize that the abstraction process is self-reflexive, we understand that there will never be a "final" statement about any experience. We can always add one to a number and get a higher number. Similarly, we can always make a statement about a statement, an abstraction about an abstraction (Johnson, pp. 151-55).

In this section, I have explained three concepts from General Semantics: non-identity, non-allness, and self-reflexiveness. Non-identity emphasizes an individual's perception of reality as opposed to an objective reality. Non-allness implies that we can never describe anything fully. Self-reflexiveness implies that we can never come to a "final" conclusion about anything. In the next part of this essay, I hope to apply these concepts to the idea that debate resolutions possess some sort of intrinsic meaning to which the debater should adhere.

The implications of "intent"

The notion that debate resolutions have a specific intent is controvert to each of the three concepts just discussed. Resolutional intent denies the notion of non-identity by assuming a "truth" about a "reality." When this truth exists, we draw a thick dark line between "topical" cases and "squirrel" cases. This creates taboos--ideas that

are not recognized in the reality of the topic--and implies that the reality is constant, never subject to change. The topical cases at the beginning and end of each semester will be the same, regardless of the ideas and knowledge that debaters discover as they research the topic. It seems to me that this can stifle creative thinking and innovation; anticipation and prediction. Ultimately, we risk the debater becoming maladjusted to things that are, or could be, "different" or outside of that specified reality. I need not discuss the myriad of social and political conflicts that have developed because a group of people refused to recognize, even consider, an idea that was "different."

By ignoring the concept of non-allness, we are saying that there are specific boundaries to the resolution beyond which debaters may not cross. If an authority establishes the reality of the topic for the debaters, then they need not interpret or think much about the topic. In addition, with a predetermined intent, there is no need self-reflexiveness. The association of the individual's life experiences to the symbols becomes irrelevant. Indeed, when an authority dictates reality, there is no need for the uniqueness of individuals and their thoughts--their "humanness." In short, whomever determines the meaning of the symbols extant in the resolution controls what is discussed in debates. Debaters need only wait to be told

what the symbols mean and what cases are therefore permissible. Debaters would simply react to the predetermined intent, rather than discovering issues and positions on their own.

Summary

CEDA philosophically and, at least to some extent, practically supports the concept of the intent--or spirit--of the resolution. However, claiming that there is a true meaning of the topic--and subsequently acting, as a coach-critic, as though there is a "right" and "wrong" meaning--violates the concept of non-identity. If we look at the wording of a resolution and proclaim its meaning, we are identifying those words with a specific reality to which the debater must adhere. We are also saying that that one reality is all there is to the proposition, thus transgressing the idea of non-allness. Similarly, we are denying the self-reflexive nature of abstraction by removing the debater from much of the interpretation process. In short, teaching our debaters that resolutions have a certain intent is tantamount to saying to them that there is a predetermined, all-encompassing, objective truth, beyond which there is an intellectual void--nothing else to learn or even contemplate. I honestly cannot think of anything worse for an activity that stresses critical thinking.

Note

[1] The review covered Quarterly Journal of Speech, Journal of the American Forensics Association, Speech Teacher, Communication Education, Speaker and Gavel and CEDA Yearbook, from 1955 to the present.

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